

The Abyssinian War and the League of Nations: Debates in the Council

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Abstract: *The study will analyze how the Council of the League of Nations acted as a forum for discussions during the Abyssinian war (1935-1936). Most studies focused on the war underline the powerless of the League and of its Council. Moreover, the Council's role as a forum for discussions during the dispute is generally overlooked. However, the Council offered the parties involved or with interest in the conflict the opportunity to express their position and test the world opinion. The paper will study this issue by examining the minutes of the Council's meetings, published in the League of Nations Official Journal. Other sources used are the Italian media, and memoirs and journals of Italian, French and British representatives.*

Keywords: Ethiopia, Italy, League Council, Mussolini, France, Britain.

Introduction

A key event in understanding the collapse of the League of Nations' collective security is the Italian conquest of Ethiopia (1935-1936). The war was part of a chain of events that questioned the League's capacity to secure peace. Among them, the Manchurian crisis (1931-1932), the re-militarization of the Rhineland (1936), the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the partition of Czechoslovakia (1938-1939) and the Italian invasion of Albania (1939). The League proved that it was unable to protect one of its

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members. This was because Britain and (especially) France were more preoccupied with keeping Germany surrounded, thus having an oscillating reaction towards the Italian aggression.

Most studies discussing the Abyssinian War underline the weakness of the League or even tend to neglect Geneva's role in the attempts to stop Italy, simply assuming that the League was destined to fail. The same goes for the Council, the executive body of the organization. Still, scholars generally tend to overlook the Council's role as a forum for discussions during the Abyssinian affair. Hence, the following study raises and tries to answer the following question: How did the League Council act as a forum for discussions in the case of the Abyssinian War? The Council was indeed inefficient during the Abyssinian War, but it offered the countries involved or with interest in the conflict the opportunity to express their position and test the world's opinion. This was a responsibility envisioned by the British Foreign Office in its 1918 memorandum, which described a League of Nations as "a meeting of Governments with Governments"¹, as Alfred Zimmermann, one of the League's architects, wrote the memorandum².

The paper will take into account the minutes of the Council's meetings, published in the *League of Nations Official Journal*, which contain the discourses of the parties involved. The focus will be mainly on the speeches of the representatives of Italy and Ethiopia and of the powers capable of safeguarding the principles of the League, France and Britain. Also, the Italian journal *La Stampa* is uniquely suited to illustrate how the issue was perceived by Rome and what kind of information the Italian public received from its authorities. Together, they offer a better explanation for Italy's position within the Council. Complementary sources

¹ Alfred Zimmermann, *The League of Nations and the Rule of Law: 1918-1935*, London, Macmillan and Company, 1936, p. 203.

² Public Record Office, FO 371/4353, 149-51, quoted in Hidemi Suganami, *The domestic analogy and world order proposals*, Vol. 6, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 85, accessed February 16, 2016 at <https://books.google.ro/books?id=CONjtpJZLLIC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

utilized are memoirs and journals of Italian, French and British representatives.

Literature review

The interwar period offers the first contributions on the League and its Council's role in the dispute between Italy and Ethiopia. Spencer's study³ is the most valuable source for Geneva's activity during the 1935-1936 crisis. However, the limits of the interwar analyses are their descriptive character, offering merely a broad presentation of what the League and its committees tried to implement.

Post-war studies attempt to understand the reasons why the League and the Council failed to take action against Italy and why their measures were inefficient. Since military intervention seemed elusive, scholars generally focused on the sanctions imposed on Italy. In the 1960s, we have the first study on this matter. Thus, Braddick⁴ concluded that the lack of efficient economic sanctions, especially on oil and coal, was not only France's fault, but that the British were equally reluctant towards such measures directed against a state deemed useful in maintaining the *status quo*.

A similar point of view can be seen in Harris's analysis⁵, which supports the idea that the apparent British involvement was meant to impress international opinion. Harris also made the first significant attempts to analyze the debates within the League. In the 1970s, Baer⁶ continues these attempts, especially in his 1976 study. Baer is criticizing both France

³ John H. Spencer, "The Italian-Ethiopian Dispute and the League of Nations", in *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 31 (1937), No. 4.

⁴ Henderson B. Braddick, "The Hoare-Laval Plan: A Study in International Politics", in *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 24 (1962), No. 03.

⁵ Brice Harris, *The United States and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1964.

⁶ George W. Baer, "Sanctions and security: The League of Nations and the Italian-Ethiopian war, 1935-1936", in *International Organization*, Vol. 27 (1973), No. 2; G. W. Baer, *Test Case: Italy, Ethiopia, and the League of Nations*, Stanford, Hoover Press, 1976.

and Britain for preferring appeasement and not enforcement against Italy. However, Ristuccia⁷, using Italian economic archives, demonstrates that a strong League policy for imposing oil and coal sanctions would have been useless without US contribution.

The analysis of existing literature on the League and its attempts to solve the Abyssinian crisis demonstrates that scholars focused mainly on what Geneva tried to implement, neglecting the importance of discussions within the international organization and its Council regarding the peaceful settlement of the dispute.

Italy as a League of Nations member and its interest in Abyssinia

Italy entered the First World War following the 1915 Treaty of London. However, Britain and France did not honour all their promises, leading to a general frustration and dissatisfaction among Italians. All these would eventually work in favour of Benito Mussolini. Following the October 1922 March on Rome, Mussolini's *Partito Nazionale Fascista* started to take control over the state.

As a result of the establishment of the League of Nations in 1919, Italy received a seat in the Council, along with France, Britain and Japan. Even since the early fascist period, Mussolini constantly criticized Geneva, considering Rome's position within the League as one of "absolute inferiority"⁸. Despite this hostile attitude, Italy remained in the League, although it requested more Italian representatives in Geneva's institutions⁹.

Italy's relations with neighbouring countries were also problematic. Thus, in 1923, Italy invaded the Greek island of Corfu, while Geneva failed

⁷ Cristiano Andrea Ristuccia, "The 1935 Sanctions Against Italy: Would coal and oil have made a difference?", in *European Review of Economic History*, Vol. 4 (2000), No. 1.

⁸ "Il discorso", *La Stampa*, November 17, 1923, p. 1.

⁹ Anique H. M. van Ginneken, *Historical dictionary of the League of Nations*, Scarecrow Press, 2006, p. 114, accessed January 4, 2016 at <https://books.google.dk/books?id=-mjkuGZLhBIC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

to oppose the move. Regarding Albania, following the treaties of Tirana (1926 and 1927), Italy successfully transformed the small Balkan state into a protectorate. But the tensest relations were with Yugoslavia, particularly because of the Italian minority in Dalmatia and because of the incorporation in 1924 by Italy of the Free State of Fiume.

In spite of these issues, Italy participated in the 1925 Locarno discussions, which resulted in the German acknowledgement of its western frontier with France and Belgium, under Italian and British guarantees. Still, Italy's relatively few colonies encouraged her to seek other opportunities, Ethiopia becoming a possible target. But Mussolini had to continuously postpone his idea of an invasion of Ethiopia because of the danger of war and instability on the European continent¹⁰.

The Four-Power Pact, through the institutionalization of cooperation between the great powers, was meant to offer Italy opportunity and time as well as an immobilization of the opposition from Europe¹¹. Signed in June 1933, it never came into effect, mainly because of French and German opposition. Still, German rearmament worried Mussolini, especially in relation to his interests in Austria. In this sense, Italy convened a meeting at Stresa with Britain and France. The April 1935 Stresa Front was an occasion for Rome and the other two major European powers to reaffirm their support for the Locarno Treaties.

But at the time of the Stresa Front, Mussolini's oscillating foreign policy already suffered a radical turn, Italy preparing itself for war with Ethiopia. Italian interests in Ethiopia were not new, considering the Italo-Abyssinian War of 1896 which ended with Rome's defeat. Ethiopia was not just a free spot in Africa in the midst of colonized territory, but also a member of the League since 1923. Therefore, Mussolini carefully planned his actions. The Walwal incident of 1934 –a military clash between Italian

¹⁰ H. James Burgwyn, *Italian foreign policy in the interwar period, 1918-1940*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997, p. 80, accessed January 4, 2016, <https://books.google.dk/books?id=PNHxISN-dmQC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

and Ethiopian troops in an undetermined border region– was the perfect occasion to put pressure on Ethiopia. The importance given by Italy to the conquest of Ethiopia is reflected in Mussolini's words, who considered the acquired territory "the jewel of the regime" and the respective period "the romantic years of fascism"¹².

The Council's position on the Italo-Abyssinian dispute before the war

After the Walwal incident, relations between the two countries continued to be problematic, a fact illustrated by the Ethiopian Government's January 3, 1935 telegram to the secretary-general of the League. The telegram expressed Addis Ababa's concern following the advancement of the Italian army on Gerlogubi¹³. Less than two weeks after, the memorandum of January 15 suggested that the problem should be brought before the Council¹⁴. However, both Italy and Abyssinia agreed initially to solve their disputes by using the 1928 Italo-Ethiopian Treaty of Conciliation and Arbitration. This was a solution previously rejected by the Italian government¹⁵. In other words, the Italian dictator finally agreed to apply the provision of the 1928 treaty in order to avoid discussions in the Council.

The two letters sent by the two sides to the secretary general and presented to the Council members on January 19 show that Italy was using the 1928 treaty as a way of postponing any discussions in the Council on the matter. Thus, the Italian representative Baron Pompeo Aloisi argued that "the discussion of the Abyssinian request would not facilitate in any

¹² Galeazzo Ciano, *Diario. Volume secondo. 1941-1943*, Milano, Roma, Rizzoli Editore, 1946, p. 38.

¹³ "Telegram dated January 3rd, 1935, from the Abyssinian Government to the secretary-general", in *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1935, p. 252.

¹⁴ "Memorandum by the Imperial Abyssinian Government on the Incidents at Walwal between November 23rd and December 5th, 1934", in *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1935, p. 258.

¹⁵ J. H. Spencer, *op. cit.*, p. 615.

way the continuance of the direct negotiations”¹⁶. Ethiopia, on the other hand, had no choice and accepted the postponement of the Council’s discussion with regard to the dispute. It could only hope that Italy “is prepared to take all expedient measures and confirm or give all useful instructions to the avoidance of fresh incidents”¹⁷. The situation in the Italian media, however, reflected another situation. For example, at the beginning of the following month, *La Stampa* wrote about Ethiopian massing of troops¹⁸ and about Abyssinian hatred towards Europeans¹⁹.

Italian military movements and the failure of direct negotiations between the two sides convinced Addis Ababa to request the Council’s arbitration in March. It underlined, in the letter to the secretary general, its willingness “to act in accordance with the counsels and decisions of the League of Nations”²⁰. Although the Council did debate the Ethiopian request in its April 15 extraordinary session, it decided to discuss the dispute during the May session, since “the two parties had both made perfectly clear declarations as to their pacific intentions”²¹. Italy, using Article 15 of the Covenant, argued that there is no need for the Council to examine the Ethiopian request since the issue was already submitted to arbitration²².

The Italian representative did not mention anything about Ethiopia’s claims that military movements were taking place in Eastern Africa. Baron Aloisi just referred to the Italian telegram sent to the secretary general, and

¹⁶ “Eighth Meeting (Private, Then Public) Eighty-Fourth Session of the Council”, in *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1935, p. 162.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 163.

¹⁸ “Una nuova aggressione etiopica contro un nostro posto di guardia”, *La Stampa*, February 11, 1935, p. 1.

¹⁹ “L’odio abissino contro gli europei e la minaccia di nuove razzie”, *La Stampa*, February 11, 1935, p. 1.

²⁰ “Letter, dated March 17th, 1935, from the Ethiopian Government to the secretary-general”, in *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 5, 1935, p. 572.

²¹ “First Meeting (Private) Eighty-Fifth (Extraordinary) Session of the Council”, in *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 5, 1935, p. 548.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 547.

only after Teclé-Hawariate, the representative of Ethiopia, mentioned the issue in front of the Council²³.

While admitting that Italy did accept arbitration in accordance with the 1928 treaty, the Ethiopian representative complained that the Italian government avoided a reply in the process of immediately designating the arbitrator²⁴. Still, Ethiopia refrained from being too critical. It only requested assurance from Italy that its actions were “sincerely friendly”²⁵, while simultaneously making a discreet suggestion that the Covenant should be applied to the dispute²⁶.

France, represented by minister of foreign affairs Pierre Laval, and Chile agreed with the president’s proposal that the dispute should be discussed during the May session and, thus, declined the request of placing the Italo-Abyssinian issue on the Council’s current agenda²⁷. However, while approving the postponement of discussions, the British and Spanish representatives, Sir John Simon and Salvador de Madariaga, shared with the Council members their concerns. Simon, thus, talked about the risk of entering the May session without progress²⁸. The Spanish representative even suggested that one of the states could be “in a state of subjectivity”²⁹, referring here to Ethiopia. Indeed, Aloisi would privately warn Anthony Eden, British minister for League of Nations affairs, about the gravity of the situation, stating that the entire prestige of the regime was at risk for Italy, not just a colony³⁰.

During its May 25 meeting, the Council finally discussed the issue. The result was the approval of two resolutions. Through the first resolution, the Council requested the secretary general to report to its members all the

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 548.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 549.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ Anthony Eden, *The Eden Memoirs: Facing the Dictators*, London, Cassell, 1962, p. 206.

information he may receive from the two sides, especially about the work of the arbitrators³¹. The second resolution stated that the Council will meet if the fifth arbitrator will not be selected by July 25, or if the agreement by means of arbitration or conciliation would not have occurred by August 25³². The meeting was an occasion for Italy to point out that its military manoeuvres are “just steps to put the territory of its colonies into a state of defence”³³.

Nevertheless, the representatives of France and Britain, Laval and Eden, expressed their hopes that the two parties are still capable of finding a solution through the 1928 treaty³⁴. London and Paris had special interests in Ethiopia, considering their tripartite treaty with Italy (1906) regarding the African state. Some interwar scholars like Keirstead saw the pact as a key explanation for French and British passivism³⁵. However, the dispute should be seen in the light of the later events. The two democratic powers considered Italy a vital ally in keeping Hitler in check and Mussolini’s firm attitude in the case of the 1934 Austrian crisis strengthened this belief. The German denunciation of the disarmament clause of the Versailles Treaty made matters even worse. The Italian dictator’s confidence was evident in a speech given in May that denied an Anglo-French approach on the Abyssinian issue and announced the sending of as many troops as necessary³⁶. Eden believed that Mussolini should have been in no position to say this³⁷.

Despite the optimism showed during the May 25 session, the arbitration process did not make progress. During the July 31 session,

³¹ “Fifth Meeting (Public) Eighty-Sixth Session of the Council”, in *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 6, 1935, p. 640.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 641.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 642.

³⁵ Stella Keirstead, “The League and Abyssinia”, in *The Dalhousie Review*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 1936, pp. 326-327.

³⁶ “Chiare fermissime parole del Duce sull’Africa Orientale”, *La Stampa*, May 15, 1935, p.

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³⁷ A. Eden, *op.cit.*, p. 204.

Gaston Jèze, the French representative of Ethiopia³⁸, blamed the Italian government for the failure of the arbitration attempt³⁹. The meeting did not have a practical result since the Council decided to follow Laval's suggestion, by now French prime-minister, to allow the members of the Council and especially the representatives of France and Britain, to find a solution that would enable the Council to implement its May resolution⁴⁰. Hence, the Council's August 3 extraordinary session began with the presentation of the two resolutions negotiated by Britain and France. The first resolution regulated the task of the Commission of Conciliation and Arbitration while the second stated that the Council will meet on September 4 to examine the situation⁴¹.

During the meeting, details of the Franco-British plan were revealed by Eden. Thus, while being convinced that the appointment of the fifth arbitrator will be a successful move, he announced that the signatory powers of the 1906 Agreement will commence conversations⁴². Moreover, he gave assurance that his country "will devote every effort to securing a pacific settlement of this dispute in harmony with the principles of the Covenant"⁴³. Britain was in a particularly difficult position because of the pro-League result of the Peace Ballot, published in June. In other words, it had to come to terms with Italy, while supporting Geneva in the same time. This made British foreign policy more inclined than France's to enforce the League's collective security. Also, the British treated Germany less as a problem than their French counterparts. An example in this regard would be the June 1935 Naval Agreement with Berlin, which officially allowed

³⁸ Jèze was a French law professor at Sorbonne who represented Ethiopia before the League. See G. W. Baer, *Test Case: Italy, Ethiopia and the League of Nations*, Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 1976, p. 56.

³⁹ First Meeting (Private) Eighty-Seventh (Extraordinary) Session of the Council", in *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 8, 1935, p. 965.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 965.

⁴¹ "Second Meeting (Public) Eighty-Seventh (Extraordinary) Session of the Council", *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 8, 1935, pp. 967-968.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 969.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

Hitler to violate the Versailles limits regarding the German navy. In the same month, the Maffey Committee which was dealing with British interests in Ethiopia noted that London did not have reasons to oppose an Italian annexation of Ethiopia, since Britain had no essential interests in the region⁴⁴. It is believed that Mussolini would have obtained a copy of the document⁴⁵.

As agreed, the Council met on September 4 in a session that eventually became a turning point of the conflict. Relevant for this session was the decision of the Italo-Ethiopian Commission of Conciliation and Arbitration issued a day before, which stated that neither Italy nor Ethiopia was responsible for the incident⁴⁶. The session revealed that the negotiations between France, Britain and Italy had failed. Eventually, this became clearer. As Aloisi wrote in his journal Mussolini's words, they stated that Italy sought to gain time and not an agreement, unless they could get everything, including the emperor's decapitation⁴⁷. Although both Eden and Laval stressed their countries' loyalty towards the League, the British representative mentioned for the first time the possibility of modifying the Ethiopian border, arguing that "we did not examine, but we did not in any way exclude the possibility of territory adjustments to which Italy and Ethiopia might agree"⁴⁸. It can be implied from this statement that discussions between the three powers were already setting the stage for the Hoare-Laval Pact later in December.

The September 4 session also revealed British and French interests in maintaining Italy as an ally. As Laval's pointed out, the ideal solution would be the one "affording Italy the satisfaction she can legitimately claim

⁴⁴ H. J. Burgwyn, *op.cit.*, p. 117.

⁴⁵ A. Eden, *op.cit.*, p. 241.

⁴⁶ "Decision of the Italo-Ethiopian Commission of Conciliation and Arbitration, dated September 3rd, 1935", in *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 11, 1935, p. 1355.

⁴⁷ Pompeo Aloisi, *Journal (25 Juillet 1932 Juin 1936) baron Aloisi*, Paris, Plon, 1957, p. 293.

⁴⁸ "First Meeting (Private, Then Public) Eighty-Eighth Session of the Council", in *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 11, 1935, p. 1134.

without disregarding the fundamental rights of Ethiopian sovereignty”⁴⁹. Prime Minister Laval had more serious problems to solve at that moment, considering France’s financial and political turmoil. Thus, his country could not afford forceful actions against Italy. Moreover, Laval secretly assured Mussolini in January 1935 of France’s disinterest regarding Ethiopia⁵⁰. Eden would find out later about this from the Italian dictator⁵¹.

What made the September 4 session so important was Italy’s surprising accusations: “a State such as Ethiopia can have equality neither of rights nor of duties with civilized States”⁵². Up to the Commission of Conciliation and Arbitration’s decision, Rome used the Walwal incident as a justification for its military manoeuvres. Since the commission did not attribute the start of the dispute to either of the two parts, Italy had to change its strategy and seek new arguments against Addis Ababa. It was also the first time when the Italian representative argued in the Council that Ethiopia is a threat to Italian possessions⁵³. Jèze, the representative of Ethiopia, was so surprised that he could hardly even comment on the accusations. He pointed to the danger of creating a precedent in terms of debating in the Council a state’s own politics, the way in which it deals with its affairs and the requesting of a death sentence based on this⁵⁴. According to Aloisi’s journal, it was Laval who suggested the attack⁵⁵. The French prime-minister would have also confessed his desire to remain faithful to the Stresa Front and the Italo-French friendship⁵⁶.

The tense situation within the Council continued the next day. While the Ethiopian representative was criticizing Italy for its aggressive

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 1135.

⁵⁰ Donald Cameron Watt, “The Secret Laval-Mussolini Agreement of 1935 on Ethiopia”, in *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1961, p. 71.

⁵¹ A. Eden, *op.cit.*, p. 224.

⁵² “First Meeting (Private, Then Public) Eighty-Eighth Session of the Council” in *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 11, 1935, p. 1136.

⁵³ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 1137.

⁵⁵ P. Aloisi, *op.cit.*, p. 298.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

position, the Italian representative left the Council table⁵⁷. The September 5 meeting was the first time when the Soviet Union, through Maxim Litvinov commented on the issue. Litvinov expressed his regret that one of the states involved in the dispute is a country with which Moscow was having friendly relations⁵⁸. The fact that the representative of the USSR is mentioning the preservation of peace on the European continent⁵⁹, illustrates Moscow's fear of Germany, whom it replaced in the Council in 1934. Moreover, after the Italo-Abyssinian War, the USSR proposed to Italy an Italo-Franco-Soviet pact as condition for removing Moscow's sanctions⁶⁰. Nonetheless, referring indirectly to the Manchurian Crisis of 1931, Litvinov warned that "the repetition of that precedent would certainly have a cumulative effect and, in its turn, would stimulate new conflicts more directly affecting the whole of Europe"⁶¹.

The Abyssinian War in the Council's debates

With the war starting on October 3, 1935, the Council was required to drastically change its policy and speed up the process of finding a solution to the conflict. This was, however, not an easy task. On the first Council meeting after the start of the war, on October 5, Italy, as expected, accused Ethiopia of being the true aggressor⁶². Still, the Italian representative went as far as blaming the debates within the League for the outbreak of the war: "The responsibility for this situation must be attributed to the encouragement which Ethiopia thought she could find in the

⁵⁷ "Second Meeting (Public) Eighty-Eighth Session of the Council", in *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 11, 1935, p. 1140.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*. p. 1142.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁰ Cerruti to Rome, 5/22/36: MAE (Rome) AP URSS b19 f1, quoted in J. Calvitt Clarke III, "Italy and the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 23, 1939", in *Selected Annual Proceedings of the Florida Conference of Historians*, Vol. 3/4, December 1996, p. 35.

⁶¹ "Second Meeting (Public) Eighty-Eighth Session of the Council" in *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 11, 1935, p. 1142.

⁶² "Fifth Meeting (Private, Then Public) Eighty-Ninth Session of the Council", in *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 11, 1935, p. 1210.

discussions at Geneva”⁶³. This statement is in a striking opposition with Mussolini’s October 2 discourse. Referring to the way Italy was treated after the First World War and to the 1896 Italo-Abyssinian War, *Il Duce* said that “We have been patient for thirteen years (...) With Ethiopia we have been patient for forty years! That is enough!”⁶⁴ Italy was facing a difficult task, namely to justify its actions in front of the League, while preparing in the same time the Italian public for the invasion.

On the other hand, the Ethiopian representative reinforced his government’s position, namely that the provisions of the Covenant should be applied by the Council⁶⁵. Teclé-Hawariate made an interesting remark about the small states, namely that if the actions against Ethiopia would triumph, these countries could one day become as vulnerable as Ethiopia, facing “the risk of becoming the prey of a powerful and unscrupulous aggressor”⁶⁶. Although Teclé-Hawariate was using this argument to pursue the Council to take action, his fear was eventually confirmed by the future developments.

Italy used all its possibilities to slow down any discussion or measures, such as through attempts to postpone the discussions on the reports of the Committee of Thirteen and of the Committee of Six⁶⁷. The opinions about the war were mixed within the League. Some members argued that Italy was seeking a bit of colonial prestige and revenge for the 1896 defeat, while others believed that Rome was facing economic difficulties and could barely fight a lasting war. In these conditions, many

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 1211.

⁶⁴ “*Abbiamo pazientato tredici anni (...) Con l’Etiopia, abbiamo pazientato quarant’anni! Ora basta!*”. “Un’ ora solenne sta per scoccare”, *La Stampa*, October 3, 1935, p. 1.

⁶⁵ “Fifth Meeting (Private, Then Public) Eighty-Ninth Session of the Council” in *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 11, 1935, p. 1212.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 1213.

⁶⁷ “Sixth Meeting (Private) Eighty-Ninth Session of the Council”, *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 11, 1935, p. 1215. The committee of thirteen was formed of the Council members minus Italy, having to prepare a report on the issue. The committee of six was established to analyze the new developments brought by the start of the war.

advocated for feeble sanctions that would not distance Italy and would not start a war, counting that Mussolini would, thus, compromise⁶⁸.

On October 7, Italy tried again to portray Ethiopia's accession to the League of Nations as a mistake, suggesting even "the possibility of rectifying that mistake"⁶⁹. This meant legal measures regarding Addis Ababa's membership in the League. A frequent theme used by Aloisi was slavery⁷⁰. Although slavery was indeed still an issue in Ethiopia, Italy's repeated remarks on the matter were exaggerated. Both the League's Advisory Committee of Experts and the Committee of Experts on Slaves recognized Addis Ababa's progress, although slow, in relation to the fight against slave trade and slavery⁷¹. Ethiopia again stressed its weakness, poverty and lack of weapons, her only hope being the League of Nations⁷². Although the Italian dictator did not expect any actions from neither the Council, nor the Sanctions Committee, the two bodies enabled Italy to test how the wind was blowing⁷³. Mussolini was, thus, observing the attitude of the international public towards his actions.

In this type of debates, Italy was permanently blaming Ethiopia for the conflict and Addis Ababa decided to put all its hopes on the League's actions. All of this changed after France and Britain proposed the Hoare-Laval Pact. The pact offered Italy significant portions of Ethiopian territory and economic influence. Both Laval and Samuel Hoare, British secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, were convinced that the League would not have opposed the solution⁷⁴. Indeed, the Council discussed the proposal on

⁶⁸ B. Harris, *op.cit.*, p. 70.

⁶⁹ "Seventh Meeting (Public) Eighty-Ninth Session of the Council", in *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 11, 1935, p. 1218.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁷¹ Jean Allain, *The Law and Slavery: Prohibiting Human Exploitation*, BRILL, 2015, p. 157, accessed January 4, 2016, at <https://books.google.dk/books?id=fmdECQAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

⁷² "Seventh Meeting (Public) Eighty-Ninth Session of the Council" in *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 11, 1935, p. 1222.

⁷³ G. W. Baer, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

⁷⁴ Pierre Laval, *The unpublished diary of Pierre Laval*, London, Falcon Press, 1948, p. 31.

December 18. The debates did not have a practical nature since the pact was, by then, already compromised by the public reaction, Hoare resigning the same day. Still, it should be taken into account the way in which the pact was seen in relation to Geneva. Hence, although the British representative, Mr. Eden, stressed the obligation the League members had to respect in relation to the Covenant, the communication from the two powers admitted that the Paris agreement was the result of “the failure of the efforts undertaken by the League of Nations”⁷⁵.

Perhaps the most significant discourse in relation to the Hoare-Laval Pact was that of Wolde Mariam, the representative of Addis Ababa. Before the Council session, the Ethiopian Government had requested that the Pact should be discussed before the Assembly, but to no avail⁷⁶. As Spencer points out, Ethiopia hoped it could obtain help from the smaller countries not represented in the Council⁷⁷. Considering its difficult position, Ethiopia avoided being too critical towards the Fraco-British proposal. Nonetheless, it did raise the following question: “is it consistent with the Covenant that the Covenant-breaking State should be begged, by the League of Nations, to be good enough to accept a large part of its victim’s territory together with the effective control of the rest under the cloak of the League?”⁷⁸

Realizing that the Council was unable to stop Italy, Ethiopia requested “facilities to acquire more complete and more up-to-date defensive material than she now possesses”⁷⁹. Such measures were discussed previously in the League, notably in the Convention on Financial Assistance, which should have allowed a state victim of aggression to

⁷⁵ “Ninth Meeting (Public) Eighty-Ninth Session of the Council”, in *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1936, p. 10.

⁷⁶ “Letter, dated December 12th, 1935, from the representative of Ethiopia to the secretary-general”, in *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1936, p. 42.

⁷⁷ J. H. Spencer, *op.cit.*, p. 627.

⁷⁸ “Ninth Meeting (Public) Eighty-Ninth Session of the Council” in *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1936, p. 12.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

request financial aid⁸⁰. However, it was clear at this point that any potential aid from the League would be illusory. In other words, as Baer argues, what could have once been an easy to manage imperial rivalry affair became a serious European crisis and a provocation to the European settlement⁸¹.

This European crisis worsened in March 1936, with German troops occupying the Rhineland, a severe violation of the Versailles Treaty. The following month, on April 20, the Council adopted a resolution that confirmed the failure of the Committee of Thirteen. The resolution infuriated the Ethiopian representative, Wolde Mariam, who asked whether the League will “bow to the accomplished fact because it has been accomplished by a powerful State and because the victim is isolated”⁸². The Ethiopian concerns are understandable since soon after the Council meeting, on May 2, Emperor Haile Selassie left Addis Ababa and three days later Italian troops seized the Ethiopian capital.

Tense moments were present during the discussions even after the conquest of Ethiopia. For example, the Italian representative’s defiance of the League, on May 11: “the Italian delegation cannot agree to the so-called Ethiopian representative being present at the Council table. Nothing resembling an organized Ethiopian State exists”⁸³. Baron Aloisi withdrew again from the meeting. Although it lost the war, Ethiopia reaffirmed its loyalty towards the League⁸⁴. This is understandable since there was nothing it could do for the moment, its only hope being possible future actions from Geneva or the neighbouring powers. In his journal, the Italian diplomat regarded that day as an end to the dispute, at least at a diplomatic level⁸⁵. The Council meeting from May 12 was the last one where the

⁸⁰ See League of Nations Assembly, Third Committee, *Convention on Financial Assistance*, Series of League of Nations publications, IX, Disarmament, 1930, IX, 4.

⁸¹ G. W. Baer, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁸² “Eleventh Meeting (Private, Then Public) Ninety-First (Extraordinary) Session of the Council”, *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 1936, p. 392.

⁸³ “First Meeting (Private, Then Public) Ninety-Second Session of the Council”, *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 6, 1936, p. 535.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁵ P. Aloisi, *op.cit.*, p. 383.

Abyssinian issue was discussed, but Aloisi already announced that he would leave Geneva⁸⁶. Since the war was over, the representatives of Chile and Ecuador argued in favour of raising the sanctions imposed on Italy⁸⁷.

On July 6, the coordination committee decided that the League's sanctions imposed on Italy would be raised on July 15.⁸⁸ Later, Mussolini declared during his November 1, 1936 speech that "For the League of Nations the dilemma arises, in clear terms: either renewal or perish. Since it is extremely difficult that it can renew itself, for our part it can easily parish".⁸⁹ As a result, Italy would limit its connections to Geneva and leave the League in December 1937. In a desperate attempt to maintain peace, France and Britain recognized in 1938 Italy's conquest of Ethiopia.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that it failed to safeguard the League's collective security in the case of the Italo-Abyssinian War, the Council was, nevertheless, a forum for discussing the issue. In this sense, it was used for presenting and discussing the opinions of the parties involved in the dispute, Italy and Ethiopia, and of the League's two democratic powers, Britain and France.

Since it was the executive body of the League, The Council was used by Italy as a way of postponing Geneva's efforts to solve the crisis. It was also an occasion for Mussolini to test the reaction of the world opinion. Moreover, Italy revealed, officially and for the first time, its aggressive

⁸⁶ "Second Meeting (Private, Then Public) Ninety-Second Session of the Council", *League of Nations Official Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 6, 1936, pp. 539-540.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 540-541.

⁸⁸ "Meeting held on Monday, July 6th, 1936, at 10 A.M. Third session of the co-ordination committee", *League of Nations Official Journal. Special Supplement*, No. 149, 1936, p. 63.

⁸⁹ "Per la Società delle Nazioni il dilemma si pone, in termini chiarissimi: o rinnovarsi o perire. Poiché è estremamente difficile che essa possa rinnovarsi, per nostro conto può tranquillamente perire". "La tagliente parola del Condottiero", *La Stampa*, November 2, 1936, p. 1.

policy towards the African state in the Council, during the session of September 5. Ethiopia, on the other hand, tried to speed up the process of finding a solution to the conflict. Although it generally agreed with the suggestions of both Italy and the Council, it was explainable because of its difficult negotiating position. The discourses of its representatives changed following the Hoare-Laval pact, which showed the League's inability to offer aid. Its only hope now was financial assistance, which Geneva was in no position to offer.

The Council's debates showed again that the League's collective security was dependent on France and Britain. The interventions of other representatives, although seemingly more firm, (such as the case of the USSR), played a marginal role. Thus, the two democratic powers argued in the Council for a solution in accordance with the principles of the League. This was vital to the public opinion in their countries, especially for Britain. Still, both London and Paris argued for a solution that would satisfy Italy, which meant keeping Mussolini as an ally against Germany.

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